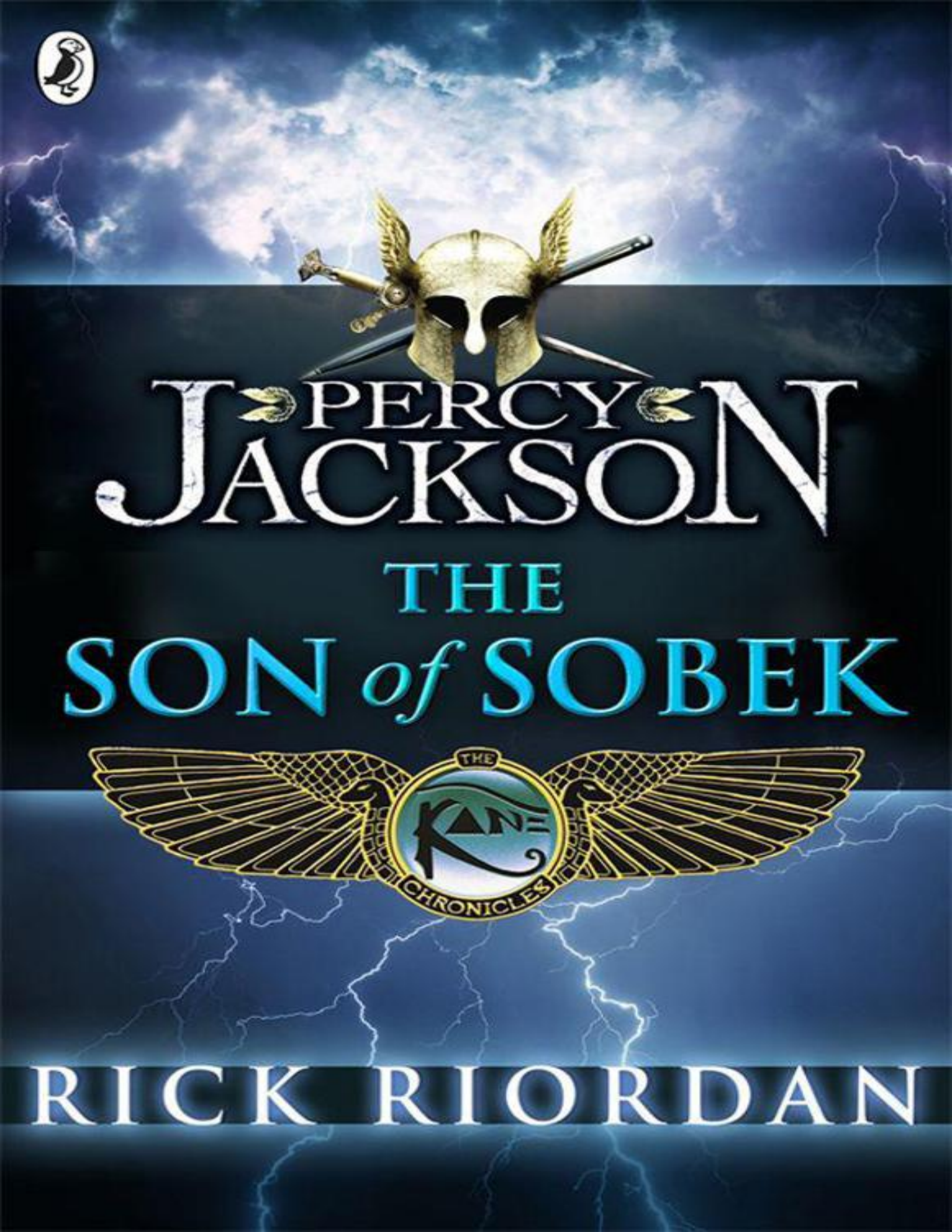
PERCY JACKSON
THE SON of SOBEK
THE KANE CHRONICLES
RICK RIORDAN

PUFFIN

RICK RIORDAN

THE SON *of* SOBEK

A Carter Kane/Percy Jackson Adventure

PUFFIN

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The Son of Sobek

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Riordan is the creator of the award-winning, bestselling Percy Jackson series and the thrilling Kane Chronicles series. According to Rick, the idea for the Percy Jackson stories was inspired by his son Haley. But rumour has it that Camp Half-Blood actually exists, and Rick spends his summers there recording the adventures of young demigods. Some believe that, to avoid a mass panic among the mortal population, he was forced to swear on the River Styx to present Percy Jackson's story as fiction. Rick lives in Texas (apart from his summers on Half-Blood Hill) with his wife and two sons. To learn more about him and the Percy Jackson and Kane Chronicles series, visit: *www.rickriordanmythmaster.co.uk*

Books by Rick Riordan

The Percy Jackson series:

PERCY JACKSON AND THE LIGHTNING THIEF
PERCY JACKSON AND THE SEA OF MONSTERS
PERCY JACKSON AND THE TITAN'S CURSE
PERCY JACKSON AND THE BATTLE OF THE LABYRINTH
PERCY JACKSON AND THE LAST OLYMPIAN
PERCY JACKSON: THE DEMIGOD FILES

The Heroes of Olympus series:

THE LOST HERO
THE SON OF NEPTUNE
THE MARK OF ATHENA
HEROES OF OLYMPUS: THE DEMIGOD FILES

The Kane Chronicles series:

THE RED PYRAMID
THE THRONE OF FIRE
THE SERPENT'S SHADOW

CARTER

The Son of Sobek

GETTING EATEN BY A GIANT CROCODILE was bad enough.

The kid with the glowing sword only made my day worse.

Maybe I should introduce myself.

I'm Carter Kane – part-time high-school freshman, part-time magician, full-time worrier about all the Egyptian gods and monsters who are constantly trying to kill me.

Okay, that last part is an exaggeration. Not *all* the gods want me dead. Just a lot of them – but that kind of goes with the territory, since I'm a magician in the House of Life. We're like the police for Ancient Egyptian supernatural forces, making sure they don't cause too much havoc in the modern world.

Anyway, on this particular day I was tracking down a rogue monster on Long Island. Our scryers had been sensing magical disturbances in the area for several weeks. Then the local news started reporting that a large creature had been sighted in the ponds and marshes near the Montauk Highway – a creature that was eating the wildlife and scaring the locals. One reporter even called it the Long Island Swamp Monster. When mortals start raising the alarm, you know it's time to check things out.

Normally my sister, Sadie, or some of our other initiates from Brooklyn House would've come with me. But they were all at the First Nome in Egypt for a week-long training

session on controlling cheese demons (yes, they’re a real thing – believe me, you don’t want to know), so I was on my own.

I hitched our flying reed boat to Freak, my pet griffin, and we spent the morning buzzing around the south shore, looking for signs of trouble. If you’re wondering why I didn’t just ride on Freak’s back, imagine two hummingbird-like wings beating faster and more powerfully than helicopter blades. Unless you want to get shredded, it’s really better to ride in the boat.

Freak had a pretty good nose for magic. After a couple of hours on patrol, he shrieked, ‘FREEEEEEK!’ and banked hard to the left, circling over a green marshy inlet between two neighbourhoods.

‘Down there?’ I asked.

Freak shivered and squawked, whipping his barbed tail nervously.

I couldn’t see much below us – just a brown river glittering in the hot summer air, winding through swamp grass and clumps of gnarled trees until it emptied into Moriches Bay. The area looked a bit like the Nile Delta back in Egypt, except here the wetlands were surrounded on both sides by residential neighbourhoods with row after row of grey-roofed houses. Just to the north, a line of cars inched along the Montauk Highway – vacationers escaping the crowds in the city to enjoy the crowds in the Hamptons.

If there really was a carnivorous swamp monster below us, I wondered how long it would be before it developed a taste for humans. If that happened … well, it was surrounded by an all-you-can-eat buffet.

‘Okay,’ I told Freak. ‘Set me down by the riverbank.’

As soon as I stepped out of the boat, Freak screeched and zoomed into the sky, the boat trailing behind him.

'Hey!' I yelled after him, but it was too late.

Freak is easily spooked. Flesh-eating monsters tend to scare him away. So do fireworks, clowns and the smell of Sadie's weird British Ribena drink. (Can't blame him on that last one. Sadie grew up in London and developed some pretty strange tastes.)

I would have to take care of this monster problem, then whistle for Freak to pick me up once I was done.

I opened my backpack and checked my supplies: some enchanted rope, my curved ivory wand, a lump of wax for making a magical *shabti* figurine, my calligraphy set and a healing potion my friend Jaz had brewed for me a while back. (She knew that I got hurt a lot.)

There was just one more thing I needed.

I concentrated and reached into the Duat. Over the last few months, I'd got better at storing emergency provisions in the shadow realm – extra weapons, clean clothes, Fruit by the Foot and chilled six-packs of root beer – but sticking my hand into a magical dimension still felt weird, like pushing through layers of cold, heavy curtains. I closed my fingers round the hilt of my sword and pulled it out – a weighty *khopesh* with a blade curved like a question mark. Armed with my sword and wand, I was all set for a stroll through the swamp to look for a hungry monster. Oh, joy!

I waded into the water and immediately sank to my knees. The river bottom felt like congealed stew. With every step, my shoes made such rude noises – *suck-plop*, *suck-plop* – that I was glad Sadie wasn't with me. She never would've stopped laughing.

Even worse, making this much noise, I knew I wouldn't be able to sneak up on any monsters.

Mosquitoes swarmed me. Suddenly I felt nervous and alone.

Could be worse, I told myself. *I could be studying cheese demons.*

But I couldn't quite convince myself. In a nearby neighbourhood, I heard kids shouting and laughing, probably playing some kind of game. I wondered what that would be like – being a normal kid, hanging out with my friends on a summer afternoon.

The idea was so nice I got distracted. I didn't notice the ripples in the water until fifty yards ahead of me something broke the surface – a line of leathery blackish-green bumps. Instantly it submerged again, but I knew what I was dealing with now. I'd seen crocodiles before, and this was a freakishly big one.

I remembered El Paso, the winter before last, when my sister and I had been attacked by the crocodile god Sobek. That *wasn't* a good memory.

Sweat trickled down my neck.

'Sobek,' I murmured, 'if that's you, messing with me again, I swear to Ra …'

The croc god had promised to leave us alone now that we were tight with his boss, the sun god. Still … crocodiles get hungry. Then they tend to forget their promises.

No answer from the water. The ripples subsided.

When it came to sensing monsters, my magic instincts weren't very sharp, but the water in front of me seemed much darker. That meant either it was deep, or something large was lurking under the surface.

I almost hoped it *was* Sobek. At least then I stood a chance of talking to him before he killed me. Sobek loved to boast.

Unfortunately, it wasn't him.

The next microsecond, as the water erupted around me, I realized too late that I should've brought the entire Twenty-first Nome to help me. I registered glowing yellow eyes as big as my head, the glint of gold jewellery round a massive neck. Then monstrous jaws opened – ridges of crooked teeth and an expanse of pink maw wide enough to gulp down a garbage truck.

And the creature swallowed me whole.

Imagine being shrink-wrapped upside down inside a gigantic slimy garbage bag with no air. Being in the monster's belly was like that, only hotter and smellier.

For a moment I was too stunned to do anything. I couldn't believe I was still alive. If the crocodile's mouth had been smaller, he might have snapped me in half. As it was, he had gulped me down in a single Carter-size serving, so I could look forward to being slowly digested.

Lucky, right?

The monster started thrashing around, which made it hard to think. I held my breath, knowing that it might be my last. I still had my sword and wand, but I couldn't use them with my arms pinned to my side. I couldn't reach any of the stuff in my bag.

Which left only one answer: a word of power. If I could think of the right hieroglyphic symbol and speak it aloud, I could summon some industrial-strength wrath-of-the-gods-type magic to bust my way out of this reptile.

In theory: a great solution.

In practice: I'm not so good at words of power even in the best of situations. Suffocating inside a dark, smelly reptile gullet wasn't helping me focus.

You can do this, I told myself.

After all the dangerous adventures I'd had, I couldn't die like this. Sadie would be devastated. Then, once she got over her grief, she'd track down my soul in the Egyptian afterlife and tease me mercilessly for how stupid I'd been.

My lungs burned. I was blacking out. I picked a word of power, summoned all my concentration and prepared to speak.

Suddenly the monster lurched upwards. He roared, which sounded really weird from the inside, and his throat contracted round me like I was being squeezed from a toothpaste tube. I shot out of the creature's mouth and tumbled into the marsh grass.

Somehow I got to my feet. I staggered around, half blind, gasping and covered with crocodile goo, which smelled like a scummy fish tank.

The surface of the river churned with bubbles. The crocodile was gone, but standing in the marsh about twenty feet away was a teenage guy in jeans and a faded orange T-shirt that said CAMP something. I couldn't read the rest. He looked a little older than me – maybe seventeen – with tousled black hair and sea-green eyes. What really caught my attention was his sword – a straight double-edged blade glowing with faint bronze light.

I'm not sure which of us was more surprised.

For a second, Camper Boy just stared at me. He noted my *khopesh* and wand, and I got the feeling that he actually *saw* these things as they were. Normal mortals have trouble seeing magic. Their brains can't interpret it, so they might look at my sword, for instance, and see a baseball bat or a walking stick.

But this kid … he was different. I figured he must be a magician. The only problem was I'd met most of the magicians in the North American nomes, and I'd never seen

this guy before. I'd also never seen a sword like that. Everything about him seemed … *un-Egyptian.*

'The crocodile,' I said, trying to keep my voice calm and even. 'Where did it go?'

Camper Boy frowned. 'You're welcome.'

'What?'

'I stuck that croc in the rump.' He mimicked the action with his sword. 'That's why it vomited you up. So, you're welcome. What were you doing in there?'

I'll admit I wasn't in the best mood. I smelled. I hurt. And, yeah, I was a little embarrassed: the mighty Carter Kane, head of Brooklyn House, had been disgorged from a croc's mouth like a giant hairball.

'I was resting,' I snapped. 'What do you *think* I was doing? Now, who are you, and why are you fighting my monster?'

'*Your* monster?' The guy trudged towards me through the water. He didn't seem to have any trouble with the mud. 'Look, man, I don't know who you are, but that crocodile has been terrorizing Long Island for weeks. I take that kind of personally, as this is my home turf. A few days ago, it ate one of our pegasi.'

A jolt went up my spine like I'd backed into an electric fence. 'Did you say *pegasi*?'

He waved the question aside. 'Is it your monster or not?'

'I don't own it!' I growled. 'I'm trying to *stop* it! Now, where –'

'The croc headed that way.' He pointed his sword to the south. 'I would already be chasing it, but you surprised me.'

He sized me up, which was disconcerting since he was half a foot taller. I still couldn't read his T-shirt except for the word CAMP. Round his neck hung a leather strap with some colourful clay beads, like a kid's arts-and-crafts project. He wasn't carrying a magician's pack or a wand. Maybe he kept

them in the Duat? Or maybe he was just a delusional mortal who'd accidentally found a magic sword and thought he was a superhero. Ancient relics can really mess with your mind.

Finally he shook his head. 'I give up. Son of Ares? You've got to be a half-blood, but what happened to your sword? It's all bent.'

'It's a *khopesh.*' My shock was rapidly turning to anger. 'It's supposed to be curved.'

But I wasn't thinking about the sword.

Camper Boy had just called me a *half-blood*? Maybe I hadn't heard him right. Maybe he meant something else. But my dad was African-American. My mom was white. *Half-blood* wasn't a word I liked.

'Just get out of here,' I said, gritting my teeth. 'I've got a crocodile to catch.'

'Dude, *I* have to catch the crocodile,' he insisted. 'Last time you tried, it ate you. Remember?'

My fingers tightened round my sword hilt. 'I had everything under control. I was about to summon a fist –'

For what happened next, I take full responsibility.

I didn't mean it. Honestly. But I was angry. And, as I may have mentioned, I'm not always good at channelling words of power. While I was in the crocodile's belly, I'd been preparing to summon the Fist of Horus: a giant glowing blue hand that can pulverize doors, walls and pretty much anything else that gets in your way. My plan had been to punch my way out of the monster. Gross, yes, but hopefully effective.

I guess that spell was still in my head, ready to be triggered like a loaded gun. Facing Camper Boy, I was furious, not to mentioned dazed and confused; so when I meant to say the English word *fist* it came out in Ancient Egyptian instead: *khefa.*

Such a simple hieroglyph:

You wouldn't think it could cause so much trouble.

As soon as I spoke the word, the symbol blazed in the air between us. A giant fist the size of a dishwasher shimmered into existence and slammed Camper Boy into the next county.

I mean I *literally* punched him out of his shoes. He rocketed from the river with a loud *suck-plop!* And the last thing I saw was his bare feet achieving escape velocity as he flew backwards and disappeared from sight.

No, I didn't feel good about it. Well … maybe a tiny bit good. But I also felt mortified. Even if the guy was a jerk, magicians weren't supposed to go around sucker-punching kids into orbit with the Fist of Horus.

'Oh, great.' I hit myself on the forehead.

I started to wade across the marsh, worried that I'd actually killed the guy. 'Man, I'm sorry!' I yelled, hoping he could hear me. 'Are you –?'

The wave came out of nowhere.

A twenty-foot wall of water slammed into me and pushed me back into the river. I came up spluttering, a horrible taste like fish food in my mouth. I blinked the gunk out of my eyes just in time to see Camper Boy leaping towards me ninja-style, his sword raised.

I lifted my *khopesh* to deflect the blow. I just managed to keep my head from being cleaved in half, but Camper Boy was strong and quick. As I reeled backwards, he struck again and again. Each time, I was able to parry, but I could tell I was outmatched. His blade was lighter and quicker, and – yes, I'll admit it – he was a better swordsman.

I wanted to explain that I'd made a mistake. I wasn't really his enemy. But I needed all my concentration just to keep from getting sliced down the middle.

Camper Boy, however, had no trouble talking.

'Now I get it,' he said, swinging at my head. 'You're some kind of monster.'

CLANG! I intercepted the strike and staggered back.

'I'm not a monster,' I managed.

To beat this guy, I'd have to use more than just a sword. The problem was I didn't want to hurt him. Despite the fact that he was trying to chop me into a Kane-flavoured barbecue sandwich, I still felt bad for starting the fight.

He swung again, and I had no choice. I used my wand this time, catching his blade in the crook of ivory and channelling a burst of magic straight up his arm. The air between us flashed and crackled. Camper Boy stumbled back. Blue sparks of sorcery popped around him, as if my spell didn't know quite what to do with him. Who *was* this guy?

'You said the crocodile was *yours*.' Camper Boy scowled, anger blazing in his green eyes. 'You lost your pet, I suppose. Maybe you're a spirit from the Underworld, come through the Doors of Death?'

Before I could even process that question, he thrust out his free hand. The river reversed course and swept me off my feet.

I managed to get up, but I was getting really tired of drinking swamp water. Meanwhile, Camper Boy charged again, his sword raised for the kill. In desperation, I dropped my wand. I thrust my hand into my backpack, and my fingers closed round the piece of rope.

I threw it and yelled the command word '*TAS!*' – *bind* – just as Camper Boy's bronze blade cut into my wrist.

My whole arm erupted in agony. My vision tunnelled. Yellow spots danced before my eyes. I dropped my sword and clutched my wrist, gasping for breath, everything forgotten except the excruciating pain.

In the back of my mind, I knew Camper Boy could kill me easily. For some reason he didn't. A wave of nausea made me double over.

I forced myself to look at the wound. There was a lot of blood, but I remembered something Jaz had told me once in the infirmary at Brooklyn House: cuts usually looked a lot worse than they were. I hoped that was true. I fished a piece of papyrus out of my backpack and pressed it against the wound as a makeshift bandage.

The pain was still horrible, but the nausea became more manageable. My thoughts started to clear, and I wondered why I hadn't been skewered yet.

Camper Boy was sitting nearby in waist-deep water, looking dejected. My magic rope had wrapped round his sword arm, then lashed his hand to the side of his head. Unable to let go of his sword, he looked like he had a single reindeer antler sprouting next to his ear. He tugged at the rope with his free hand, but of course he couldn't make any progress.

Finally he just sighed and glared at me. 'I'm really starting to hate you.'

'Hate *me*?' I protested. 'I'm gushing blood here! And you started all this by calling me a half-blood!'

'Oh, please.' Camper Boy rose unsteadily, his sword antenna making him top-heavy. 'You can't be mortal. If you were, my sword would've passed right through you. If you're not a spirit or a monster, you've got to be a half-blood. A rogue demigod from Kronos's army, I'd guess.'

Most of what this guy said, I didn't understand. But one thing sank in.

'So when you said "half-blood" …'

He stared at me like I was an idiot. 'I meant *demigod*. Yeah. What did you *think* I meant?'

I tried to process that. I'd heard the term *demigod* before, but it wasn't an Egyptian concept. Maybe this guy was sensing that I was bound to Horus, that I could channel the god's power … but why did he describe everything so strangely?

'What are you?' I demanded. 'Part combat magician, part water elementalist? What nome are you with?'

The kid laughed bitterly. 'Dude, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't hang out with gnomes. Satyrs, sometimes. Even Cyclopes. But not gnomes.'

The blood loss must have been making me dizzy. His words bounced around in my head like lottery balls: *Cyclopes*, *satyrs*, *demigods*, *Kronos.* Earlier he'd mentioned Ares. That was a Greek god, not Egyptian.

I felt like the Duat was opening underneath me, threatening to pull me into the depths. *Greek … not Egyptian.*

An idea started forming in my mind. I didn't like it. In fact, it scared the holy Horus out of me.

Despite all the swamp water I'd swallowed, my throat felt dry. 'Look,' I said, 'I'm sorry about hitting you with that fist spell. It was an accident. But the thing I don't understand … it should have killed you. It didn't. That doesn't make sense.'

'Don't sound so disappointed,' he muttered. 'But, while we're on the subject, you should be dead too. Not many people can fight me that well. And my sword should have vaporized your crocodile.'

'For the last time, it's not *my* crocodile.'

‘Okay, whatever.’ Camper Boy looked dubious. ‘The point is I stuck that crocodile pretty good, but I just made it angry. Celestial bronze should’ve turned it to dust.’

‘Celestial bronze?’

Our conversation was cut short by a scream from the nearby neighbourhood – the terrified voice of a kid.

My heart did a slow roll. I really was an idiot. I’d forgotten why we were here.

I locked eyes with Camper Boy. ‘We’ve got to stop the crocodile.’

‘Truce,’ he suggested.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘We can continue killing each other after the crocodile is taken care of.’

‘Deal. Now, could you please untie my sword hand from my head? I feel like a freaking unicorn.’

I won’t say we trusted each other, but at least now we had a common cause. He summoned his shoes out of the river – I had no idea how – and put them on. Then he helped me bind my hand with a strip of linen and waited while I swigged down half of my healing potion.

After that, I felt good enough to race after him towards the sound of the screaming.

I thought I was in pretty good shape – what with combat magic practice, hauling heavy artefacts and playing basketball with Khufu and his baboon friends (baboons don’t mess around when it comes to hoops). Nevertheless, I had to struggle to keep up with Camper Boy.

Which reminded me, I was getting tired of calling him that.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked, wheezing as I ran behind him.

He gave me a cautious glance. ‘I’m not sure I should tell you. Names can be dangerous.’

He was right, of course. Names held power. A while back, my sister, Sadie, had learned my *ren*, my secret name, and it still caused me all sorts of anxiety. Even with someone's common name, a skilled magician could work all kinds of mischief.

'Fair enough,' I said. 'I'll go first. I'm Carter.'

I guess he believed me. The lines around his eyes relaxed a bit.

'Percy,' he offered.

That struck me as an unusual name – British, maybe, though the kid spoke and acted very much like an American.

We jumped a rotten log and finally made it out of the marsh. We'd started climbing a grassy slope towards the nearest houses when I realized more than one voice was screaming up there now. Not a good sign.

'Just to warn you,' I told Percy, 'you can't kill the monster.'

'Watch me,' Percy grumbled.

'No, I mean it's *immortal.*'

'I've heard that before. I've vaporized plenty of *immortals* and sent them back to Tartarus.'

Tartarus? I thought.

Talking to Percy was giving me a serious headache. It reminded me of the time my dad took me to Scotland for one of his Egyptology lectures. I'd tried to talk with some of the locals and I knew they were speaking English, but every other sentence seemed to slip into an alternate language – different words, different pronunciations – and I'd wonder what the heck they were saying. Percy was like that. He and I *almost* spoke the same language – magic, monsters, et cetera. But his vocabulary was completely wrong.

'No,' I tried again, halfway up the hill. 'This monster is a *petsuchos* – a son of Sobek.'

'Who's Sobek?' he asked.

‘Lord of crocodiles. Egyptian god.’

That stopped him in his tracks. He stared at me, and I could swear the air between us turned electric. A voice, very deep in my mind, said: *Shut up. Don’t tell him any more.*

Percy glanced at the *khopesh* I’d retrieved from the river, then the wand in my belt. ‘Where are you from? Honestly.’

‘Originally?’ I asked. ‘Los Angeles. Now I live in Brooklyn.’

That didn’t seem to make him feel any better. ‘So this monster, this *pet-suck-o* or whatever –’

‘*Petsuchos*,’ I said. ‘It’s a Greek word, but the monster is Egyptian. It was like the mascot of Sobek’s temple, worshipped as a living god.’

Percy grunted. ‘You sound like Annabeth.’

‘Who?’

‘Nothing. Just skip the history lesson. How do we kill it?’

‘I told you –’

From above came another scream, followed by a loud *CRUNCH*, like the sound made by a metal compactor.

We sprinted to the top of the hill, then hopped the fence of somebody’s backyard and ran into a residential cul-de-sac.

Except for the giant crocodile in the middle of the street, the neighbourhood could have been Anywhere, USA. Ringing the cul-de-sac were half a dozen single-storey homes with well-kept front lawns, economy cars in the driveways, mailboxes at the kerb, flags hanging above the front porches.

Unfortunately, the all-American scene was kind of ruined by the monster, who was busily eating a green Prius hatchback with a bumper sticker that read MY POODLE IS SMARTER THAN YOUR HONOUR STUDENT. Maybe the *petsuchos* thought the Toyota was another crocodile, and he was asserting his dominance. Maybe he just didn’t like poodles and/or honour students.

Whatever the case, on dry land the crocodile looked even scarier than he had in the water. He was about forty feet long, as tall as a delivery truck, with a tail so massive and powerful it overturned cars every time it swished. His skin glistened blackish green and gushed water that pooled around his feet. I remembered Sobek once telling me that his divine sweat created the rivers of the world. Yuck. I guessed this monster had the same holy perspiration. Double yuck.

The creature's eyes glowed with a sickly yellow light. His jagged teeth gleamed white. But the weirdest thing about him was his bling. Round his neck hung an elaborate collar of gold chains and enough precious stones to buy a private island.

The necklace was how I had realized the monster was a *petsuchos*, back at the marsh. I'd read that the sacred animal of Sobek wore something just like it back in Egypt, though what the monster was doing in a Long Island neighbourhood, I had no idea.

As Percy and I took in the scene, the crocodile clamped down and bit the green Prius in half, spraying glass and metal and pieces of airbag across the lawns.

As soon as he dropped the wreckage, half a dozen kids appeared from nowhere – apparently they'd been hiding behind some of the other cars – and charged the monster, screaming at the top of their lungs.

I couldn't believe it. They were just elementary-age kids, armed with nothing but water balloons and Super Soakers. I guessed that they were on summer break and had been cooling off with a water fight when the monster interrupted them.

There were no adults in sight. Maybe they were all at work. Maybe they were inside, passed out from fright.

The kids looked angry rather than scared. They ran round the crocodile, lobbing water balloons that splashed harmlessly against the monster's hide.

Useless and stupid? Yes. But I couldn't help admiring their bravery. They were trying their best to face down a monster that had invaded their neighbourhood.

Maybe they saw the crocodile for what it was. Maybe their mortal brains made them think it was an escaped elephant from the zoo, or a crazed FedEx delivery driver with a death wish.

Whatever they saw, they were in danger.

My throat closed up. I thought about my initiates back at Brooklyn House, who were no older than these kids, and my protective 'big brother' instincts kicked in. I charged into the street, yelling, 'Get away from it! Run!'

Then I threw my wand straight at the crocodile's head. '*Samir!*'

The wand hit the croc on the snout, and blue light rippled across his body. All over the monster's hide, the hieroglyph for *pain* flickered:

Everywhere it appeared, the croc's skin smoked and sparked, causing the monster to writhe and bellow in annoyance.

The kids scattered, hiding behind ruined cars and mailboxes. The *petsuchos* turned his glowing yellow eyes on me.

At my side, Percy whistled under his breath. 'Well, you got his attention.'

'Yeah.'

'You sure we can't kill him?' he asked.

‘Yeah.’

The crocodile seemed to be following our conversation. His yellow eyes flicked back and forth between us, as if deciding which of us to eat first.

‘Even if you *could* destroy his body,’ I said, ‘he would just reappear somewhere nearby. That necklace? It’s enchanted with the power of Sobek. To beat the monster, we have to get that necklace off. Then the *petsuchos* should shrink back into a regular crocodile.’

‘I hate the word *should*,’ Percy muttered. ‘Fine. I’ll get the necklace. You keep him occupied.’

‘Why do *I* get to keep him occupied?’

‘Because you’re more annoying,’ Percy said. ‘Just try not to get eaten again.’

‘ROARR!’ the monster bellowed, his breath like a seafood restaurant’s dumpster.

I was about to argue that Percy was *plenty* annoying, but I didn’t get the chance. The *petsuchos* charged, and my new comrade-in-arms sprinted to one side, leaving me right in the path of destruction.

First random thought: *Getting eaten twice in one day would be very embarrassing.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Percy dashing towards the monster’s right flank. I heard the mortal kids come out from their hiding places, yelling and throwing more water balloons like they were trying to protect me.

The *petsuchos* lumbered towards me, his jaws opening to snap me up.

And I got angry.

I’d faced the worst Egyptian gods. I’d plunged into the Duat and trekked across the Land of Demons. I’d stood at

the very shores of Chaos. I was *not* going to back down from an overgrown gator.

The air crackled with power as my combat avatar formed round me – a glowing blue exoskeleton in the shape of Horus.

It lifted me off the ground until I was suspended in the middle of a twenty-foot-tall, hawk-headed warrior. I stepped forward, bracing myself, and the avatar mimicked my stance.

Percy yelled, 'Holy Hera! What the –?'

The crocodile slammed into me.

He nearly toppled me. His jaws closed round my avatar's free arm, but I slashed the hawk warrior's glowing blue sword at the crocodile's neck.

Maybe the *petsuchos* couldn't be killed. I was at least hoping to cut through the necklace that was the source of his power.

Unfortunately, my swing went wide. I hit the monster's shoulder, cleaving his hide. Instead of blood, he spilled sand, which is pretty typical for Egyptian monsters. I would have enjoyed seeing him disintegrate completely, but no such luck. As soon as I yanked my blade free, the wound started closing and the sand slowed to a trickle. The crocodile whipped his head from side to side, pulling me off my feet and shaking me by the arm like a dog with a chew toy.

When he let me go, I sailed straight into the nearest house and smashed through the roof, leaving a hawk-warrior-shaped crater in someone's living room. I really hoped I hadn't just flattened some defenceless mortal in the middle of watching *Dr Phil.*

My vision cleared, and I saw two things that irritated me. First, the crocodile was charging me again. Second, my new

friend Percy was just standing in the middle of the street, staring at me in shock. Apparently my combat avatar had startled him so much he'd forgotten his part of the plan.

'What the creeping crud is *that*?' he demanded. 'You're inside a giant glowing chicken-man!'

'Hawk!' I yelled.

I decided that if I survived this day I would have to make sure this guy never met Sadie. They'd probably take turns insulting me for the rest of eternity. 'A little help here?'

Percy unfroze and ran towards the croc. As the monster closed in on me, I kicked him in the snout, which made him sneeze and shake his head long enough for me to extricate myself from the ruined house.

Percy jumped on the creature's tail and ran up his spine. The monster thrashed around, his hide shedding water all over the place, but somehow Percy managed to keep his footing. The guy must have practised gymnastics or something.

Meanwhile, the mortal kids had found some better ammunition – rocks, scrap metal from the wrecked cars, even a few tyre irons – and were hurling the stuff at the monster. I didn't want the crocodile turning his attention towards them.

'HEY!' I swung my *khopesh* at the croc's face – a good solid strike that should've taken off his lower jaw. Instead, he somehow snapped at the blade and caught it in his mouth. We ended up wrestling for the blue glowing sword as it sizzled in his mouth, making his teeth crumble to sand. That couldn't have felt good, but the croc held on, tugging against me.

'Percy!' I shouted. 'Any time now!'

Percy lunged for the necklace. He grabbed hold and started hacking at the gold links, but his bronze sword didn't

make a dent.

Meanwhile, the croc was going crazy trying to yank away my sword. My combat avatar started to flicker.

Summoning an avatar is a short-term thing, like sprinting at top speed. You can't do it for very long, or you'll collapse. Already I was sweating and breathing hard. My heart raced. My reservoirs of magic were being severely depleted.

'Hurry,' I told Percy.

'Can't cut it!' he said.

'A clasp,' I said. 'There's gotta be one.'

As soon as I said that, I spotted it – at the monster's throat, a golden cartouche encircling the hieroglyphs that spelled SOBEK. 'There – on the bottom!'

Percy scrambled down the necklace, climbing it like a net, but at that moment my avatar collapsed. I dropped to the ground, exhausted and dizzy. The only thing that saved my life was that the crocodile had been pulling at my avatar's sword. When the sword disappeared, the monster lurched backwards and stumbled over a Honda.

The mortal kids scattered. One dived under a car, only to have the car disappear – smacked into the air by the croc's tail.

Percy reached the bottom of the necklace and hung on for dear life. His sword was gone. Probably he'd dropped it.

Meanwhile, the monster regained his footing. The good news: he didn't seem to notice Percy. The bad news: he *definitely* noticed me, and he looked mightily torqued off.

I didn't have the energy to run, much less summon magic to fight. At this point, the mortal kids with their water balloons and rocks had more of a chance of stopping the croc than I did.

In the distance, sirens wailed. Somebody had called the police, which didn't exactly cheer me up. It just meant more

mortals were racing here as fast as they could to volunteer as crocodile snacks.

I backed up to the kerb and tried – ridiculously – to stare down the monster. ‘Stay, boy.’

The crocodile snorted. His hide shed water like the grossest fountain in the world, making my shoes slosh as I walked. His lamp-yellow eyes filmed over, maybe from happiness. He knew I was done for.

I thrust my hand into my backpack. The only thing I found was a lump of wax. I didn’t have time to build a proper *shabti*, but I had no better idea. I dropped my pack and started working the wax furiously with both hands, trying to soften it.

‘Percy?’ I called.

‘I can’t unlock the clasp!’ he yelled. I didn’t dare take my eyes off the croc’s, but in my peripheral vision I could see Percy pounding his fist against the base of the necklace. ‘Some kind of magic?’

That was the smartest thing he’d said all afternoon (not that he’d said a lot of smart things to choose from). The clasp was a hieroglyphic cartouche. It would take a magician to figure it out and open it. Whatever and whoever Percy was, he was no magician.

I was still shaping the lump of wax, trying to make it into a figurine, when the crocodile decided to stop savouring the moment and just eat me. As he lunged, I threw my *shabti*, only half formed, and barked a command word.

Instantly the world’s most deformed hippopotamus sprang to life in midair. It sailed headfirst into the crocodile’s left nostril and lodged there, kicking its stubby back legs.

Not exactly my finest tactical move, but having a hippo shoved up his nose must have been sufficiently distracting. The crocodile hissed and stumbled, shaking his head, as

Percy dropped off and rolled away, barely avoiding the crocodile's stomping feet. He ran to join me at the kerb.

I stared in horror as my wax creature, now a living (though very misshapen) hippo, tried to either wriggle free of the croc's nostril or work its way further into the reptile's sinus cavity – I wasn't sure which.

The crocodile whipped round, and Percy grabbed me just in time, pulling me out of its trampling path.

We jogged to the opposite end of the cul-de-sac, where the mortal kids had gathered. Amazingly, none of them seemed to be hurt. The crocodile kept thrashing and wiping out homes as it tried to clear its nostril.

'You okay?' Percy asked me.

I gasped for air but nodded weakly.

One of the kids offered me his Super Soaker. I waved him off.

'You guys,' Percy told the kids, 'you hear those sirens? You've got to run down the road and stop the police. Tell them it's too dangerous up here. Stall them!'

For some reason, the kids listened. Maybe they were just happy to have something to do, but, from the way Percy spoke, I got the feeling he was used to rallying outnumbered troops. He sounded a bit like Horus – a natural commander.

After the kids raced off, I managed to say, 'Good call.'

Percy nodded grimly. The crocodile was still distracted by its nasal intruder, but I doubted the *shabti* would last much longer. Under that much stress, the hippo would soon melt back to wax.

'You've got some moves, Carter,' Percy admitted. 'Anything else in your bag of tricks?'

'Nothing,' I said dismally. 'I'm running on empty. But if I can get to that clasp I think I can open it.'

Percy sized up the *petsuchos.* The cul-de-sac was filling with water that poured from the monster's hide. The sirens were getting louder. We didn't have much time.

'Guess it's my turn to distract the croc,' he said. 'Get ready to run for that necklace.'

'You don't even have your sword,' I protested. 'You'll die!'

Percy managed a crooked smile. 'Just run in there as soon as it starts.'

'As soon as *what* starts?'

Then the crocodile sneezed, launching the wax hippo across Long Island. The *petsuchos* turned towards us, roaring in anger, and Percy charged straight at him.

As it turned out, I didn't need to ask what kind of distraction Percy had in mind. Once it started, it was pretty obvious.

He stopped in front of the crocodile and raised his arms. I figured he was planning some kind of magic, but he spoke no command words. He had no staff or wand. He just stood there and looked up at the crocodile as if to say, *Here I am! I'm tasty!*

The crocodile seemed momentarily surprised. If nothing else, we would die knowing that we'd confused this monster many, many times.

Croc sweat kept pouring off his body. The brackish stuff was up to the kerb now, up to our ankles. It sloughed into the storm drains but just continued spilling from the croc's skin.

Then I saw what was happening. As Percy raised his arms, the water began swirling counterclockwise. It started around the croc's feet and quickly built up speed until the whirlpool encompassed the entire cul-de-sac, spinning strongly enough that I could feel it pulling me sideways.

By the time I realized I'd better start running, the current was already too fast. I'd have to reach the necklace some other way.

One last trick, I thought.

I feared the effort might literally burn me up, but I summoned my final bit of magical energy and transformed into a falcon – the sacred animal of Horus.

Instantly, my vision was a hundred times sharper. I soared upwards, above the rooftops, and the entire world switched to high-definition 3D. I saw the police cars only a few blocks away, the kids standing in the middle of the street, waving them down. I could make out every slimy bump and pore on the crocodile's hide. I could see each hieroglyph on the clasp of the necklace. And I could see just how impressive Percy's magic trick was.

The entire cul-de-sac was engulfed in a hurricane. Percy stood at the edge, unmoved, but the water was churning so fast now that even the giant crocodile lost his footing. Wrecked cars scraped along the pavement. Mailboxes were pulled out of lawns and swept away. The water increased in volume as well as speed, rising up and turning the entire neighbourhood into a liquid centrifuge.

It was my turn to be stunned. A few moments ago, I'd decided Percy was no magician. Yet I'd never seen a magician who could control so much water.

The crocodile stumbled and struggled, shuffling in a circle with the current.

'Any time now,' Percy muttered through gritted teeth. Without my falcon hearing, I never would've heard him through the storm, but I realized he was talking to me.

I remembered I had a job to do. No one, magician or otherwise, could control that kind of power for long.

I folded my wings and dived for the crocodile. When I reached the necklace's clasp, I turned back to human and grabbed hold. All around me, the hurricane roared. I could barely see through the swirl of mist. The current was so strong now it tugged at my legs, threatening to pull me into the flood.

I was *so* tired. I hadn't felt this pushed beyond my limits since I'd fought the Chaos lord, Apophis himself.

I ran my hand over the hieroglyphs on the clasp. There had to be a secret to unlocking it.

The crocodile bellowed and stomped, fighting to stay on its feet. Somewhere to my left, Percy yelled in rage and frustration, trying to keep up the storm, but the whirlpool was starting to slow.

I had a few seconds at best until the crocodile broke free and attacked. Then Percy and I would both be dead.

I felt the four symbols that made up the god's name:

The last symbol didn't actually represent a sound, I knew. It was the hieroglyph for *god*, indicating that the letters in front of it – *SBK* – stood for a deity's name.

When in doubt, I thought, hit the *god* button.

I pushed the fourth symbol, but nothing happened.

The storm was failing. The crocodile started to turn against the current, facing Percy. Out of the corner of my eye, through the haze and mist, I saw Percy drop to one knee.

My fingers passed over the third hieroglyph – the wicker basket (Sadie always called it the 'teacup') that stood for the *K* sound. The hieroglyph felt slightly warm to the touch – or was that my imagination?

No time to think. I pressed it. Nothing happened.

The storm died. The crocodile bellowed in triumph, ready to feed.

I made a fist and slammed the basket hieroglyph with all my strength. This time the clasp made a satisfying *click* and sprang open. I dropped to the pavement, and several hundred pounds of gold and gems spilled on top of me.

The crocodile staggered, roaring like the guns of a battleship. What was left of the hurricane scattered in an explosion of wind, and I shut my eyes, ready to be smashed flat by the body of a falling monster.

Suddenly, the cul-de-sac was silent. No sirens. No crocodile roaring. The mound of gold jewellery disappeared. I was lying on my back in mucky water, staring up at the empty blue sky.

Percy's face appeared above me. He looked like he'd just run a marathon through a typhoon, but he was grinning.

'Nice work,' he said. 'Get the necklace.'

'The necklace?' My brain still felt sluggish. Where had all that gold gone? I sat up and put my hand on the pavement. My fingers closed round the strand of jewellery, now normal-sized … well, at least *normal* for something that could fit round the neck of an average crocodile.

'The – the monster,' I stammered. 'Where –?'

Percy pointed. A few feet away, looking very disgruntled, was a baby crocodile not more than three feet long.

'You can't be serious,' I said.

'Maybe somebody's abandoned pet?' Percy shrugged. 'You hear about those on the news sometimes.'

I couldn't think of a better explanation, but how had a baby croc got hold of a necklace that turned him into a giant killing machine?

Down the street, voices started yelling, 'Up here! There's these two guys!'

It was the mortal kids. Apparently they'd decided the danger was over. Now they were leading the police straight towards us.

'We have to go.' Percy scooped up the baby crocodile, clenching one hand round his little snout. He looked at me. 'You coming?'

Together, we ran back to the swamp.

Half an hour later, we were sitting in a diner off the Montauk Highway. I'd shared the rest of my healing potion with Percy, who for some reason insisted on calling it *nectar.* Most of our wounds had healed.

We'd tied the crocodile in the woods on a makeshift leash, just until we could figure out what to do with it. We'd cleaned up as best we could, but we still looked like we'd taken a shower in a malfunctioning car wash. Percy's hair was swept to one side and tangled with pieces of grass. His orange shirt was ripped down the front.

I'm sure I didn't look much better. I had water in my shoes, and I was still picking falcon feathers out of my shirt sleeves (hasty transformations can be messy).

We were too exhausted to talk as we watched the news on the television above the counter. Police and firefighters had responded to a freak sewer event in a local neighbourhood. Apparently pressure had built up in the drainage pipes, causing a massive explosion that unleashed a flood and eroded the soil so badly several houses on the cul-de-sac had collapsed. It was a miracle that no residents had been injured. Local kids were telling some wild stories about the Long Island Swamp Monster, claiming it had caused all the damage during a fight with two teenage boys, but of course the officials didn't believe this. The reporter admitted,

however, that the damaged houses looked like ‘something very large had sat on them’.

‘A freak sewer accident,’ Percy said. ‘That’s a first.’

‘For you, maybe,’ I grumbled. ‘I seem to cause them everywhere I go.’

‘Cheer up,’ he said. ‘Lunch is on me.’

He dug into the pockets of his jeans and pulled out a ballpoint pen. Nothing else.

‘Oh …’ His smile faded. ‘Uh, actually … can you conjure up money?’

So, naturally, lunch was on *me*. I *could* pull money out of thin air, since I kept some stored in the Duat along with my other emergency supplies; so in no time we had cheeseburgers and fries in front of us, and life was looking up.

‘Cheeseburgers,’ Percy said. ‘Food of the gods.’

‘Agreed,’ I said, but when I glanced over at him I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was: that we were referring to *different* gods.

Percy inhaled his burger. Seriously, this guy could eat. ‘So, the necklace,’ he said between bites. ‘What’s the story?’

I hesitated. I still had no clue where Percy came from or what he was, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to ask. Now that we’d fought together, I couldn’t help but trust him. Still, I sensed we were treading on dangerous ground. Everything we said could have serious implications – not just for the two of us but maybe for everyone we knew.

I felt sort of like I had two winters ago, when my uncle Amos explained the truth about the Kane family heritage – the House of Life, the Egyptian gods, the Duat, everything. In a single day, my world expanded tenfold and left me reeling.

Now I was standing at the edge of another moment like that. But if my world expanded tenfold *again* I was afraid my brain might explode.

'The necklace is enchanted,' I said at last. 'Any reptile that wears it turns into the next *petsuchos*, the Son of Sobek. Somehow that little crocodile got it round his neck.'

'Meaning someone *put* it round his neck,' Percy said.

I didn't want to think about that, but I nodded reluctantly.

'So, who?' he asked.

'Hard to narrow it down,' I said. 'I've got a lot of enemies.'

Percy snorted. 'I can relate to that. Any idea *why*, then?'

I took another bite of my cheeseburger. It was good, but I had trouble concentrating on it.

'Someone wanted to cause trouble,' I speculated. 'I think maybe …' I studied Percy, trying to judge how much I should say. 'Maybe they wanted to cause trouble that would get our attention. *Both* of our attention.'

Percy frowned. He drew something in his ketchup with a French fry – not a hieroglyph. Some kind of non-English letter. Greek, I guessed.

'The monster had a Greek name,' he said. 'It was eating pegasi in my …' He hesitated.

'In your home turf,' I finished. 'Some kind of camp, judging from your shirt.'

He shifted on his bar stool. I still couldn't believe he was talking about pegasi as if they were real, but I remembered one time at Brooklyn House, maybe a year back, when I was certain I saw a winged horse flying over the Manhattan skyline. At the time, Sadie had told me I was hallucinating. Now, I wasn't so sure.

Finally Percy faced me. 'Look, Carter. You're not nearly as annoying as I thought. And we made a good team today, but –'

‘You don’t want to share your secrets,’ I said. ‘Don’t worry. I’m not going to ask about your camp. Or the powers you have. Or any of that.’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘You’re not curious?’

‘I’m *totally* curious. But until we figure out what’s going on I think it’s best we keep some distance. If someone – some*thing* – unleashed that monster here, knowing it would draw both of our attention –’

‘Then maybe that someone wanted us to meet,’ he finished. ‘Hoping bad things would happen.’

I nodded. I thought about the uneasy feeling I’d had in my gut earlier – the voice in my head warning me not to tell Percy anything. I’d come to respect the guy, but I still sensed that we weren’t meant to be friends. We weren’t meant to be anywhere *close* to each other.

A long time ago, when I was just a little kid, I’d watched my mom do a science experiment with some of her college students.

Potassium and water, she’d told them. *Separate, completely harmless. But together –*

She dropped the potassium into a beaker of water, and *ka-blam!* The students jumped back as a miniature explosion rattled all the vials in the lab.

Percy was water. I was potassium.

‘But we’ve met now,’ Percy said. ‘You know I’m out here on Long Island. I know you live in Brooklyn. If we went searching for each other –’

‘I wouldn’t recommend it,’ I said. ‘Not until we know more. I need to look into some things on, uh, my side – try to figure out who was behind this crocodile incident.’

‘All right,’ Percy agreed. ‘I’ll do the same on my side.’

He pointed at the *petsuchos* necklace, which was glinting just inside my backpack. ‘What do we to do about that?’

‘I can send it somewhere safe,’ I promised. ‘It won’t cause trouble again. We deal with relics like this a lot.’

‘*We*,’ Percy said. ‘Meaning, there’s a lot of … you guys?’

I didn’t answer.

Percy put up his hands. ‘Fine. I didn’t ask. I have some friends back at Ca– uh, back on my side who would love tinkering with a magic necklace like that, but I’m going to trust you here. Take it.’

I didn’t realize I’d been holding my breath until I exhaled. ‘Thanks. Good.’

‘And the baby crocodile?’ he asked.

I managed a nervous laugh. ‘You want it?’

‘Gods, no.’

‘I can take it, give it a good home.’ I thought about our big pool at Brooklyn House. I wondered how our giant magic crocodile, Philip of Macedonia, would feel about having a little friend. ‘Yeah, it’ll fit right in.’

Percy didn’t seem to know what to think of that. ‘Okay, well …’ He held out his hand. ‘Good working with you, Carter.’

We shook. No sparks flew. No thunder boomed. But I still couldn’t escape the feeling that we’d opened a door, meeting like this – a door that we might not be able to close.

‘You too, Percy.’

He stood to go. ‘One more thing,’ he said. ‘If this somebody, whoever threw us together … if he’s an enemy to both of us – what if we *need* each other to fight him? How do I contact you?’

I considered that. Then I made a snap decision. ‘Can I write something on your hand?’

He frowned. ‘Like your phone number?’

‘Uh … well, not exactly.’ I took out my stylus and a vial of magic ink. Percy held out his palm. I drew a hieroglyph there

– the Eye of Horus. As soon as the symbol was complete, it flared blue, then vanished.

'Just say my name,' I told him, 'and I'll hear you. I'll know where you are, and I'll come meet you. But it will only work once, so make it count.'

Percy considered his empty palm. 'I'm trusting you that this isn't some sort of magical tracking device.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'And I'm trusting that when you call me you won't be luring me into some kind of ambush.'

He stared at me. Those stormy green eyes really were kind of scary. Then he smiled, and he looked like a regular teenager, without a care in the world.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'See you when I see you, C–'

'Don't say my name!'

'Just teasing.' He pointed at me and winked. 'Stay strange, my friend.'

Then he was gone.

An hour later, I was back aboard my airborne boat with the baby crocodile and the magic necklace as Freak flew me home to Brooklyn House.

Now, looking back on it, the whole thing with Percy seems so unreal I can hardly believe it actually happened.

I wonder how Percy summoned that whirlpool, and what the heck *celestial bronze* is. Most of all, I keep rolling one word around in my mind: *demigod.*

I have a feeling that I could find some answers if I looked hard enough, but I'm afraid of what I might discover.

For the time being, I think I'll tell Sadie about this and no one else. At first she'll think I'm kidding. And, of course, she'll give me grief, but she also knows when I'm telling the truth. As annoying as she is, I trust her (though I would never say that to her face).

Maybe she'll have some ideas about what we should do.

Whoever brought Percy and me together, whoever orchestrated our crossing paths … it smacks of Chaos. I can't help thinking this was an experiment to see what kind of havoc would result. Potassium and water. Matter and antimatter.

Fortunately, things turned out okay. The *petsuchos* necklace is safely locked away. Our new baby crocodile is splashing around happily in our pool.

But next time … well, I'm afraid we might not be so lucky.

Somewhere there's a kid named Percy with a secret hieroglyph on his hand. And I have a feeling that sooner or later I'll wake up in the middle of the night and hear one word, spoken urgently in my mind:

Carter.

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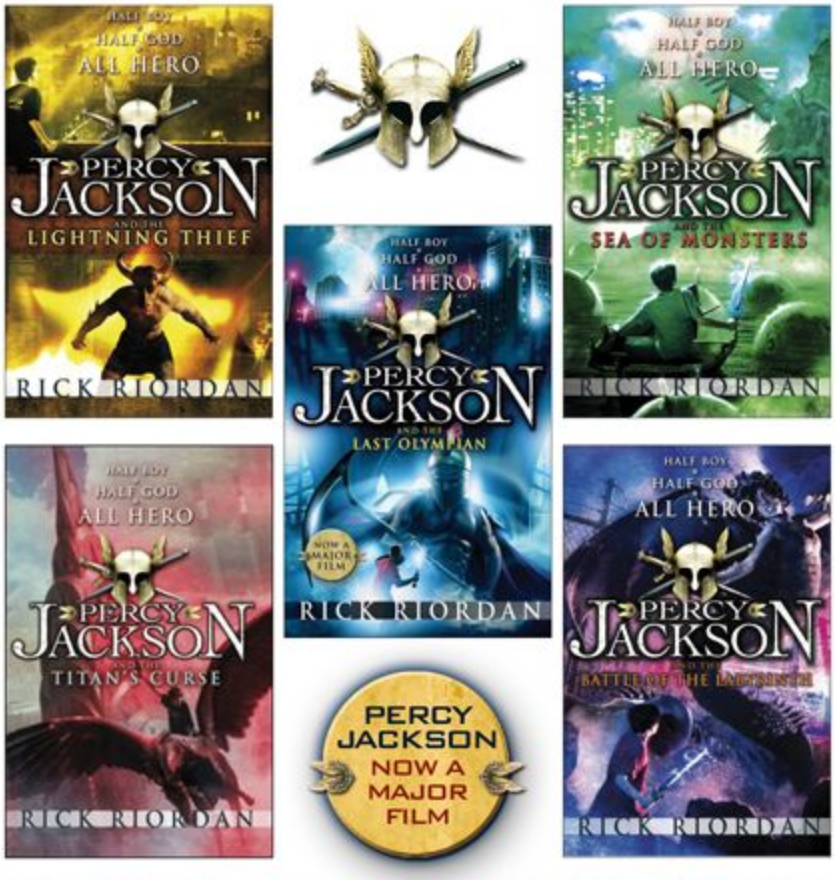

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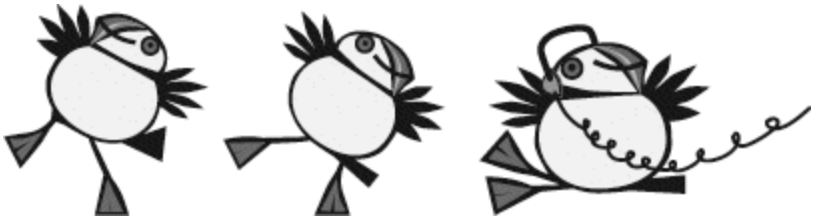

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